

CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS

A Guide to Parents & Teachers

*Bitter are the tears of your child -
Soothen them*

*Ruffled are the thoughts of your child -
Quieten them*

*Heavy is the grief of your child -
Lighten it*

*Soft is the heart of your child -
Embrace it*

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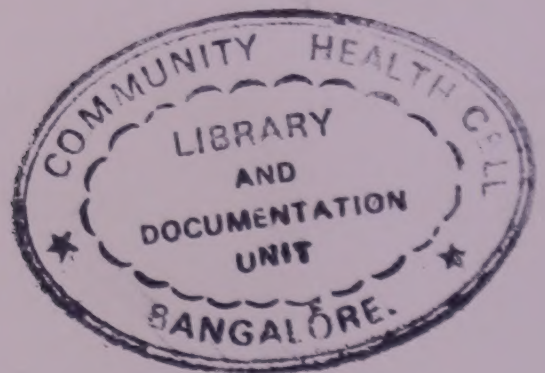
CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS

Their hurt and the healing

A guide to Parents and Teachers

We are grateful to Mrs. RUKMANI JAYARAMAN, our Honorary Consultant for her time and effort in producing this Booklet.

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THE CHILD'S APPEAL

I am the child.

I have come into your world, about which

I know nothing

I am the child.

You hold in your hands my destiny.

You determine, largely, whether I succeed or fail.

Give me, I pray you, those things that make for happiness.

Train me, I beg you, that I may be a blessing to the world.

- Mamie Gene Cole

CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS



"Ganesh always sits alone and broods. None of his friends come home. He also never visits them. I have not seen him smile, play or feel happy. Why is he like this? I am really worried" - laments Ganesh's mother.

Dinesh is fighting all the time. There are complaints from the school that he steals others' books and money. When I question, he lies without any hesitation. What is wrong with my son? - worries Dinesh's father, a recovering alcoholic.

"Sujatha wants to be a topper in everything - be it sports, studies, contests, anything. She always thinks of achieving the impossible. She constantly struggles for recognition. Why is it that she is unable to accept even minor failures?" questions her teacher.

Why do these children behave in this manner? Is there any background to it?

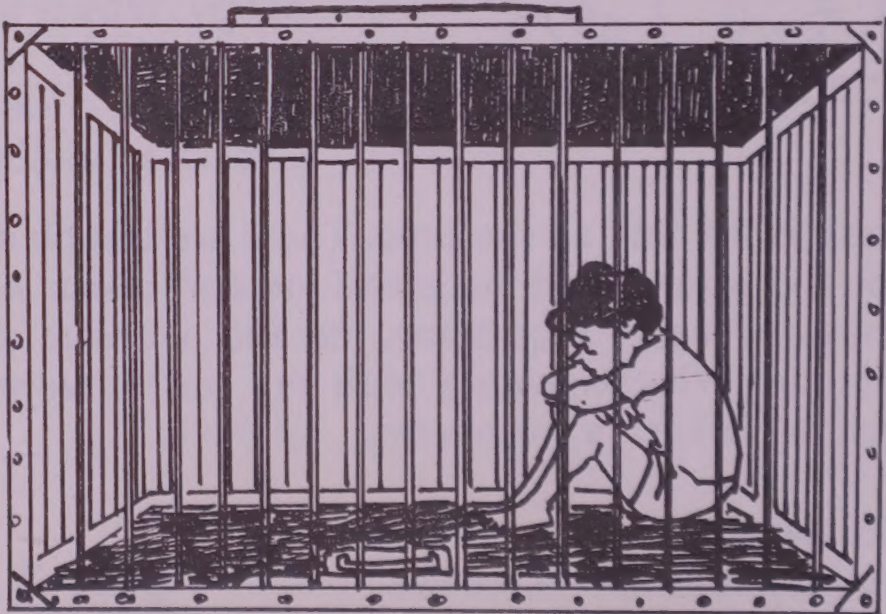
Of course, there is!



A clear understanding, an in-depth look at these children's thoughts, attitudes, reactions and feelings will reveal the powerful influence of alcohol in their lives. Their fathers happen to be alcoholics, and living in an alcoholic environment has resulted in certain behavioural patterns in these children.

HOW DOES THE FATHER'S ALCOHOLISM AFFECT HIS CHILDREN?

Alcoholism is a **family disease** which affects not merely the alcoholic, but each and every member of the family living with him. It affects the children with the same intensity with which it affects the wife; infact, even more.



Wives choose their husbands, and they also have the option of leaving them. Children have neither the option nor the mobility to enter into or exit from the parent-child relationship. While the wife feels trapped, the child is **really** trapped. The wife is emotionally helpless, whereas the child is emotionally and situationally helpless.

When does a child lose his childhood? - when he lives with an alcoholic parent. To others, he looks like any other child, dresses like any other child, and walks about like any other child until they get close enough to notice the edge of sadness in his eyes, or the worried look on his brow.

He behaves like a child - but he is not at all enjoying. He just carries on. He does not have the same spontaneity which the other kids have. But nobody really notices it - not even his own parents. Even if they do, they probably do not understand.

The fact remains that he never feels like a child. He has never known what a child feels like. Any normal child is an innocent, beautiful, delicate being - bubbling with energy, mischievous and playful. In contrast, the child of an alcoholic is **not** a **carefree** little one - he is often a **withdrawn** child who hides himself in a corner.

However, some children choose to become over responsible and undertake tasks too large for them to handle. They always try to over-achieve and struggle in the process. These children go out of the way to establish their identity, and are always trying to please people.

As a result of living in an alcoholic environment, some of these children experience physical problems like stunted



growth. Even though food may be available in their homes, the environment is such that they never feel like eating. When they fall sick, or suffer from any illness, no one ever notices them or promptly attends to their needs. These children harbour a lingering fear, anxiety, and stress. They also experience lots of problems in school like difficulty in concentration or defiance of authority and truancy. They have problems in relating to their classmates, to people around including their own family members.

These pathetic children do not drink; but are nevertheless victimised by their father's drinking. There are large numbers of children affected by living in alcoholic homes. Identification of these children has been difficult for several reasons including embarrassment, shame and consequently denial.

WHAT EXACTLY ARE THE PROBLEMS SUFFERED BY THE CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS?

Lack of a role model

No child is born with standards for evaluating behaviour, social skills or moral values. Then how do they learn? They learn from what they see. What do they see in an alcoholic family? They see nothing but guilt, anger, justification and denial of unpleasant realities. There is no positive role model for this child to follow. Father's behaviour is inconsistent. The same father who was loving in the morning, becomes a totally different man when he is under the influence of alcohol. The child is confused.

The alcoholic father does not go to work regularly; never takes up responsibilities; does not give sufficient money to his wife to run the family. He makes lots of promises and never bothers to keep any of them. There is always an undercurrent of resentment and bickering in the family.

The child, therefore, does not have a proper role model of a father. He is not clear about the role he has to play

or the values he has to follow when he grows up. He feels totally strange and confused.

In addition, these children observe the use of alcohol as a method of dealing with uncomfortable situations. Although the children vow not to drink and are aware of the potential harm of alcohol abuse, this position may give way to use of drinking as a means of escape during real or potential crisis in later life.

The non-drinking mother's behaviour also more or less resembles that of the father. Unlike the mothers of other children, she keeps brooding and never spends enough time with her child. Due to her enormous problems, she becomes highly irritable and shows her anger almost always on the child. She does not cook properly, take proper care of her children or show adequate affection towards them. The child does not have a clear idea of a mother's image either.

Lying and stealing

Children of alcoholics tell lies when it would be just as easy to tell the truth.

Why does this happen?

Lying is basic to the family system affected by alcoholism. It starts as a denial of unpleasant realities, broken promises and inconsistencies.

Wives of alcoholics live with lies and ultimately start telling them. They lie to cover up alcoholism and protect the dignity of the family.

Murali's mother was furious. She just learnt that Murali's attendance was much below the minimum.

"Why did you cut classes? Why did you take so much of leave?" - she shouted.

Murali was confused.

He thought, "Often daddy takes leave and keeps drinking at home. Then mummy goes to the office; tells his boss that he has got some urgent work at home. Or she sends a letter that he is sick. When daddy 'cuts office', nobody finds fault with him...when I do the same thing, everybody beats me. What is wrong if I do it?"

Ram's teacher was angry. Ram had been warned several times. Again he had stolen his classmate's pen.

While the teacher was scolding, Ram stood silently. He did not show any emotion.



Ram thought, "Mother takes father's money from his shirt pocket; when father asks her, she says that she knows nothing about it. She steals and also tells lies. But nobody ever confronts her; no one finds fault with her. When I take a small pen from my classmate, my teacher yells; my father beats; my mother cries. What is wrong if I do it?" Ram is really confused.

Murali's mother gives excuses because she is afraid that her husband will otherwise lose his job.

Ram's mother takes the money because she thinks she can control her husband's drinking by doing so.

To Murali and Ram, the intentions of their mothers are not clear. They see them as lying/stealing. So when they are scolded for their behaviour, they become genuinely confused both by the disapproval and by the concept of 'truth'. Their lying/stealing do not lead to any guilt because they really see nothing wrong with stealing or lying. The paradoxical message creates only a confusion and not a desire for honesty.

Loss of self-esteem

The child of an alcoholic does not feel worthy. He has a very low self-esteem. Any child becomes aware of his capabilities when significant people around him acknowledge and appreciate his efforts, performance etc. In an alcoholic home, nobody ever has the time or the mood to appreciate the child. When the child puts in lot of efforts, nobody acknowledges; when he performs well, nobody appreciates him. On the other hand, when he does not get good grades or faces a minor setback, everybody confronts him and criticises him. He is severely condemned. Whatever the child does, the feedback is normally negative and the child internalises these messages. The child starts believing that he is incapable of doing

anything right, no matter how hard he tries. He feels totally incapable, unworthy and low.

Difficulty in having fun

It is the 'child' in us that wants fun - that knows how to play. The 'child' in these children has been repressed for a very long time and therefore, they need to discover and develop it to be able to have fun. They experience only a 'chronic trauma'. They never hear their parents laughing, joking or enjoying life. Life is a very serious, angry business. The child of an alcoholic has not really learnt to play with the other kids or let himself go and have fun. The tone around the house puts a damper on his fun. Since the family members are always dull and moody, the child feels guilty if by chance he has an opportunity to laugh or have fun. Having fun is just not fun. There is no place for it in his house. He gives it up. So the spontaneous child within is squashed.

Fear and Anxiety

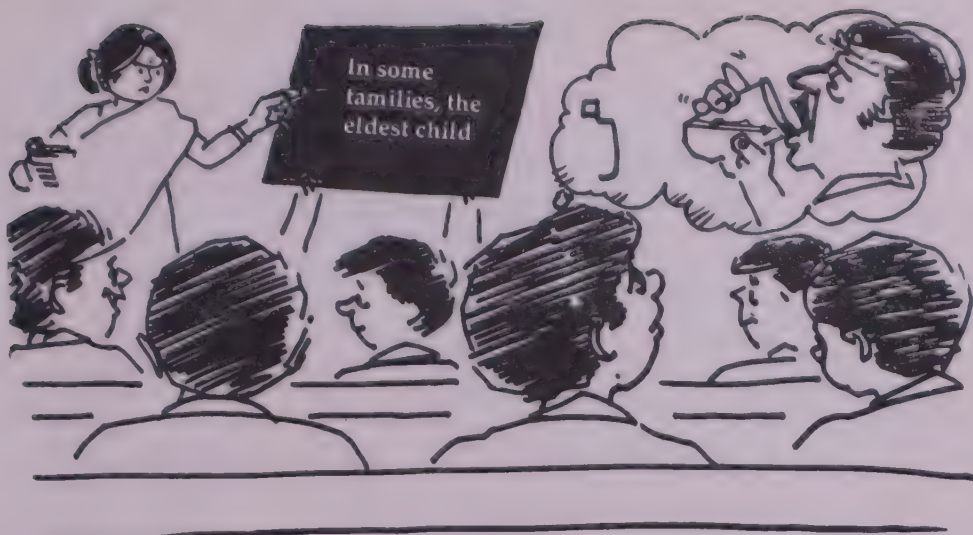
The children of alcoholics experience a deep-rooted fear which arises out of: uncertainties. Children of healthy families normally follow a daily routine. For the child of an alcoholic, everything is uncertain.

"What time will I be able to eat today?
Will mother cook at all today?
When can I go to sleep today?"

Everything is haphazard.

This child may not be able to concentrate on his studies. While the teacher lectures, he will be preoccupied with the thoughts of what may be happening at home.

"Will my father be vomiting... lying on the road right now? Yesterday also uncle said that daddy will die if he drinks like this. My God! will he be dead today? I am frightened. I don't want to go home from school. I want to run away.. but where?"



Inattentiveness and lack of concentration automatically lead to a marked decline in his academic performance. The child will be scolded for his low grades both by the teachers and parents who are totally unaware of the child's emotional problems.

These children's anxiety is sometimes indefinable and mostly unexplainable. Like the fear of the future, fear of the other person's anger is also intense in an environment controlled by alcohol. Frequent episodes of fighting may be present and these children become victims of their father's violence. Permanent exposure to this environment leads to a constant lingering fear which they carry throughout their lives.

Lack of Care and Warmth

This child's sorrow arises out of deprivation. Parental attention is never focussed on the child. The alcoholic's focus is alcohol, while the mother's focus is always the alcoholic. There are no cuddles, kisses, or hugs; and the child learns to regard physical warmth with suspicion while simultaneously craving for it. Beneath the mask of self control, is a lonely, frightened child, longing for care, warmth and love. There is actually nobody with

whom the child can share his feelings. Even the non-drinking mother is often not available, or too exhausted and sad to talk to him.

"That day I was sick. I slept all alone. Mummy was not by my side; I was terribly scared. My head was aching a lot; I cried all through the night! I trembled - Will I become alright or will I die?"

The child suffers alone. He learns that when he has a need, there will be nobody for him.

Living in Fantasies

Many children brought up in alcoholic homes have fantasies about leaving home, about running away, about the alcoholic father becoming sober, about life being fine and beautiful. They live a lot on hopes because they do not want to believe what is happening.



It was Roshani's birthday. Her mother had a severe headache. She was in bed throughout. She did not even cook food.

The next day, when Roshani entered school, everyone wished her "Many Happy Returns". With a proud smile, Roshani said,

"Yesterday mother gave me a surprise by holding a small party! She made a huge cake for me. We had lot of fun throughout the evening!"

Roshani lives in her imaginary world. She knows that none of what she said is going to happen. Therefore she prefers to imagine that her home is as nice as anyone else's.

Difficulty with intimate relationships

The adult children of alcoholics simply do not know how to have a healthy, intimate relationship. Their fear of intimacy, of letting anybody in, gets in the way. Part of their fear is of the unknown. The children are more affected by the disharmony and rejection in the family than by their father's drinking. They observe that drinking stops once in a while. But fights and tension continue. They have no frame of reference for a healthy, intimate relationship because they have never seen one. The only models they have, are their parents who are almost always fighting. The thought of being abandoned is a terrible fear that they grow up with. Lack of knowledge of what it is like to have a consistent, day to day, healthy relationship with another person, makes building one very painful and complicated.

In short, children of alcoholics grow up in similar environments. The rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, irrespective of their caste and creed, - what happens in each alcoholic home is not a whole lot different. The specific happenings may vary, but in general, one alcoholic home environment is like another. The undercurrent of tension and anxiety is ever present,

and the resulting pain and remorse predictably follow. The differences exist more in the way the children react to these experiences than to the experiences themselves.

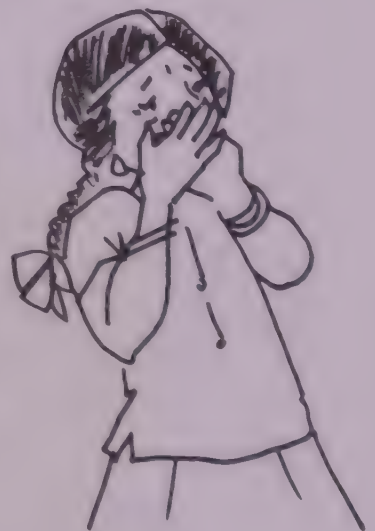
Apart from the emotional problems stated above, the children of alcoholics instinctively follow three self-inflicted, painful commands. Nobody ever taught them these directives. By sheer experience, they learn to follow them, only to avoid disappointment and unpleasantness.

WHAT ARE THE THREE PAINFUL, SELF-IMPOSED COMMANDS?

- Don't Talk - if you talk, people will make fun of your family
- Don't Trust - if you trust, you will be miserably let down
- Don't even Feel - if you feel, you will be snubbed and painfully rejected.

Don't Talk

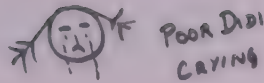
These children never share or talk freely about anything which happens at home. Any chaotic situation at home, like shouting, crying or beating will never be discussed with friends, teachers, relatives or even with their own brothers and sisters. They constantly carry a painful load which sharing can definitely lighten. Still they prefer not to disclose anything.



Why do they decide not to talk?

Almost always, they are given subtle instructions that they should not disclose their father's excessive drinking and drunken behaviour to any one - not even to their grandparents. Other's behaviour also strengthens their conviction that it is wrong to disclose what happens at home. This will affect the sense of pride in the family and the image they are expected to protect.

Madras
22-2-91



Dear God,

Last evening was again bad. Daddy came & drunk and beat up ~~mommy~~ mommy, Didi and I also. He threw up all plates! No dinner. Didi and mommy cried all night! Today Didi has exam. She is saying she will get zero only. Poor Didi!

God, mommy says I should not open my mouth to anybody. Tell me who can I & talk to? Only to YOU! God, do something, will you?

Tinker.



Flower to
YOU!

"What will my friends think if I tell them about the fights my father and mother have everyday?! They will come to know that my house is different. If I start talking, I may not be able to stop. I may pour out everything that happens at home.

How shameful will it be! No! I will not talk about it at all!"

The child learns by experience that disclosure means letting down the family.

12 year old Meena was about to go to sleep. Her father entered the house, thoroughly drunk. He had been hit by a scooter and was injured.

Meena's mother who was suffering from migraine headache since morning, was upset and started shouting. She was too sick to take care of him.

Meena was deeply afraid. She immediately cleaned her father's wound, fed him and put him to sleep. She was awake the whole night attending to her father's needs.

The next day, Meena's mother sent her to her grandparent's house. Grandmother asked her, "Meena! are you not well? You look very dull and sickly. What is wrong with you?"

Meena automatically replied, "I am quite alright. I studied all night. My eyes are puffy because I did not sleep well".

Meena walked away desperately, even though in her heart of hearts, she wanted to cling to her grandmother, wanted to open out and say, "Oh! it is terrible at home. Something is really wrong; I do not even know what exactly is wrong! Please....please help me!"

Meena wanted her grandmother to understand without her having to tell her. But she knew it would never happen. She could not share her problems with any one, and was therefore alone with her pain. Her decision will always be, "I will not talk or disclose anything."

Don't Trust

Children of alcoholics find it difficult to develop trust because the behaviour of their parents is inconsistent and unpredictable. The alcoholic father and the non-drinking mother make lots of promises, but never bother to keep any of them.



"I will take you to a movie this evening."

"I will buy you a new dress."

"I will come home early and we can all eat together."

But none of these things ever happen. The declaration next morning will always be, "I will do it later, not now." That 'later' never comes and therefore, all turn out to be lies. So far as they are concerned, they cannot take anything for granted.

Gopal's father said he will give him ten rupees, and that he could register his name for the school excursion.

Gopal's 7 year old sister called him inside and said, "Do not give in your name now. Get the money from daddy and then only give your name!"



Formerly there had been quite a few instances when their father had let them down.

The child therefore gets the message - "Forget it, do not hope for anything; do not believe anyone; do **not** trust anybody.

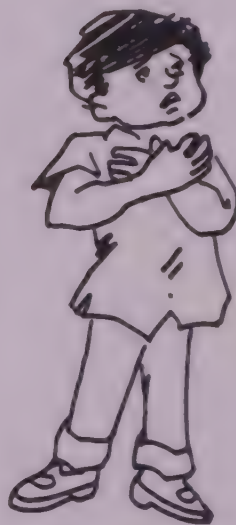
Don't Even Feel

In an alcoholic home, nobody ever recognises or appreciates any of the feelings expressed by children.

John came home and joyfully said,

"I have got the highest marks in English. My teacher was very happy."

The father was too intoxicated to respond or react.



His mother was already upset, confused and grief stricken. She showed no sign of happiness. But shouted, "You don't know the struggle

I am going through. Look at your blessed father. When do I have the time to think about you, your school or your exams?" John slowly learnt that he could not share his feelings with any of his parents.

There were also occasions when the teacher punished John and hurt him. Even then, he would not defend himself or share his problems with anyone.

Like John, many children brought up in alcoholic homes learn to repress their feelings. They learn this lesson from parents who refuse to deal with their own emotions, and from the criticism and ridicule they often receive when they try to express their own.

In course of time, these children learn that the expression of feelings will be met with disapproval, hostility or rejection. In order to avoid this punishment, they learn to suppress their feelings. In other words, they train themselves **not to feel**.

Any child longs for protection and love. The children of alcoholics have no one to care for them, no one to understand their feelings. Therefore, to fulfil these emotional needs, they discover "ways of being" (roles) that assure them of protection. Their role always takes the focus off their alcoholic father and places it on themselves. Some of these roles establish a balance for them amidst the confusion, and offer the outside world a positive message reflecting a family image they are expected to protect.

WHAT ARE THE SELF-PROTECTION ROLES TAKEN BY THESE CHILDREN?

- * The Responsible child - THE FAMILY HERO
- * The Adjusting child - THE LOST CHILD
- * The Placating child - THE MASCOT
- * The Rebellious child - THE SCAPEGOAT

The Responsible child



Why does this child take up the role of an adult? - only because the adults become 'irresponsible children'. Therefore, the child has no other option, but to become a responsible adult to avoid unpleasantness in the family.

The responsible child generally takes over the responsibility of his parents. He makes their lives easier by looking after his brothers and sisters. This child always ensures that he has the leadership position. For example, a ten year old child acts like



a parent, takes on household responsibilities, cooks and feeds the younger ones and even looks after the alcoholic father when he comes home drunk. This child takes up any responsibility so willingly, that nobody needs to order him to do things. He is often independent and capable of achievements and accomplishments. But, because these accomplishments are made not out of choice, but out of a necessity to survive, there is always a price paid for this early maturity. In the process, this child constantly carries a load which is too heavy for him to bear.

Radha was in her examination hall with a three hour paper. The examination was from 10 to 1. At 10.30, she got up, folded her answer paper, handed it over to the teacher and quickly walked away. The teacher was shocked.

She thought, "What is wrong with Radha? She is always among the top three rankers. Why did she not complete this paper? It is very strange. Is she not well?"

The next day, as soon as Radha entered school, her teacher asked her,

"What happened to you, Radha, yesterday?

Why did you not complete the paper?

Were you unwell?"

Radha immediately said,

"Madam, when the bell rang at 10.30, I suddenly remembered that yesterday was the last day for buying this month's quota of ration. From here, I hurried straight to the ration shop, stood in the queue, and finally bought sugar, rice, kerosene etc. I do not know how we would have managed this month if only I had not remembered."

Radha had no regret for having missed her exam and consequently her rank. On the otherhand,

she was too happy to have taken the responsibility of her parents.

The responsible child becomes the 'Family Hero' and begins to feel responsible for the family pain. 'Heroes' are often the oldest or the only child.

To their own parents and to the outsiders as well, these children will appear to be remarkable. But this is not true. They never enjoy the pleasures of childhood. They find it impossible to laugh or play. Even minor failures cause a lot of depression in them. They never experience the warmth and love of parents and do not know what emotional dependence means. Their only source of physical contact may be picking up their fathers from the road where they lie drunk, washing their vomit, cleaning their soiled clothes or carrying them to bed.

Deprived of the help and guidance which they legitimately deserve, they are totally denied their childhood and are given all sorts of impossible tasks. As adults, many over-achievers become workaholics who see themselves as being only as valuable as the work they accomplish. They rush from task to task, unable to rest, consumed by the need to tackle projects for elusive self-esteem.

The Adjusting child

The adjusting child learns to adjust and to handle any situation. This child does not think about the situation, nor does he outwardly show any emotion as a result of it.

Ram's father had promised to take his family to Thirupathi for a wedding. Ram got dressed up and



was waiting with his mother. His father had gone out to bring an auto to go to the railway station. Halfway through, Ram's father saw an arrack shop. He got tempted and said to himself, "I am very tense. I may be required to spend a lot of money when I go on this trip. Moreover, I have to bring my family safe home. How am I going to manage these? I will have a glass of arrack only to calm myself. I will have only one glass, nothing more."

He entered the arrack shop; started drinking and absolutely lost control. When he came out of the shop and brought an auto home, it was so late that the train would have left.

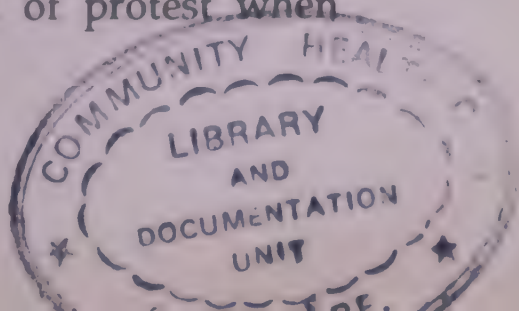
On seeing Ram's father in that state, his mother got extremely angry and started shouting.

Ram was very calm; never raised a word of protest. He unpacked his things, arranged them in the cupboard and told his mother, "Now it is only 8 O' clock, mummy; since we are not going to Thirupathi, I will take my bag and go to school. Let me not miss school today."

The adjusting child finds it easier not to question, think about, or respond in any way to what is happening in life. Adjusters do not attempt to change or prevent any situation. They simply adjust - that is, do what they are told. They detach themselves emotionally, physically and socially as much as possible.

Rekha's father promised her a new dress for her birthday. Later on, he found he had no money and therefore did not buy anything. He did not even bother to explain this to Rekha. Rekha never raised a word of protest when she came to realise this.

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She had learnt that the best way to maintain peace in the family is by responding to the instructions of others without any question.



These children are often confused with being “well adjusted” in the real sense of the term or being unaffected by the family chaos. The adoption of artificial behaviour is not conducive to full emotional development, no matter how good it looks.

The adjuster becomes a ‘Lost Child’ and suffers loneliness when he grows up. He has no zest for life. He is always afraid to take risks because of his fear of being hurt.

Most ‘lost’ children wanting peace at any cost, become agreeable and appeasing; so they don’t offer opinions or question anything.

They consider themselves pawns in a game which they do not understand, or victims of a battle they cannot escape.

Such children when they grow up, become the victims of manipulation of people around them. They cannot assert themselves even when aware of being manipulated. They, therefore, get victimised in many ways at home, in their place of work and in other social interactions. This may result in their ending up with stress related illnesses when they grow up.

The Placating child

The 'placator' goes one step beyond the 'adjuster'. He anticipates the problems of others around him and tries to help them out, unmindful of getting hurt in the process.



Vidhya's father came home fully drunk and thrashed her for no reason at all. Her mother in her despair, started crying. Vidhya went to her mother, sat near her, and told her with a smile on her face.

"Don't cry Ma! It is not at all paining. Father didn't beat me hard."

In reality, Vidhya had bruises all over her body. She was in pain. But she could not bear her mother's sorrow. She never reacted to her pain; instead, preferred to alleviate her mother's sorrow.

The placator becomes the 'Family Mascot'. He tries to make everyone laugh and feel happy. He is often cute, fun to be around, and able to use charm and humour to survive in a painful family system. No one sees the fear and insecurity deep within. This child always wears a mask of happiness, busy taking care of everyone else's emotional needs. For example, the child assists his brother in not feeling hurt or disappointed. The child intervenes and ensures that none of the children is too frightened after an aggressive scene at home. He is a warm, sensitive, listening, caring child who shows a tremendous capacity to help others. For the placator, the essence of survival lies in taking away the fears, sadness and guilt of others..

This child is so preoccupied with the needs of others, that he forgets to take care of his own. As a result, his unmet needs get accumulated and he is no more able to carry the burden. Unable to give up the mask of self-control and happiness, he feels desperate and suffers throughout his life.

The Rebellious child

Some children of alcoholics become angry and aggressive at an early age. These children become the 'Family Scapegoats' and are branded as trouble makers. Youngsters in the family normally assume this role. They are defiant and 'prickly' to be near. They are confused and scared, and show their confusion in ways that get them a lot of negative attention.



Why do some innocent children become rebellious?

These children have tried to satisfy their parents by resorting to positive methods. As they never get any attention from them, they finally resort to negative ways which will not escape their notice. They do not mind getting scolded, because for them, it is attention - even though negative. They are filled with warmth and love, but choose to conceal it under the mask of bravado and aggression.

They defy authority and get into trouble at home, indulge in fights and quarrels at school and even with their neighbours. These children end up as rebels, show delinquent behaviour, throw temper tantrums, and drop out of school. They smoke and as part of bravado even experiment with drugs/alcohol and sex.

'The scapegoats' do not wish to work hard to prove themselves worthy. As troublemakers, they divert the emphasis from the alcoholic to themselves. They cry for attention, and negative attention fulfils this emotional need. Outsiders blame these children for all the family problems.

So far, we have seen the various emotional problems experienced by the children of alcoholics, the three self-inflicted, painful commands governing their lives and the four roles adopted by them to cope with stressful situations.

In spite of the chronic trauma endured by these children, they receive too little attention when they really need it; and so they grow into adults with inadequate coping skills and unrealistic expectations. Early identification and help are critical. Teachers and parents can provide positive support to these troubled and lonely children of alcoholics.

HOW DOES THE SCHOOL TEACHER IDENTIFY THE CHILD OF AN ALCOHOLIC?

The important aspect in identifying these children, is the developmental patterns, which may either appear in an obvious fashion or may require minute observation to discern them. It is important to remember that individual or single behavioural acts do not constitute behavioural patterns. The teacher must be careful not to jump to conclusions or label children too quickly. Some behavioural patterns which might indicate alcoholism in the student's home, are listed below:

- Poor attendance without any valid reason
- Drop in school grades
- Preoccupation in class; sleepy; unable to concentrate
- Friendlessness and isolation or being withdrawn
- Sudden temper and other emotional outbursts

- Extreme fear about situations involving contact of parents
- Presence of bruises quite often on the child's body
- Agitation, rebelliousness
- Inability to pay school fees on time despite the father holding a job
- Unable to comply with school regulations such as bringing in permission slips, materials for project etc.
- Nobody present during parent-teacher meetings.

Now that we have identified the children of alcoholics as a group with unique problems and special needs, how do we help them?

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL AND THE TEACHER

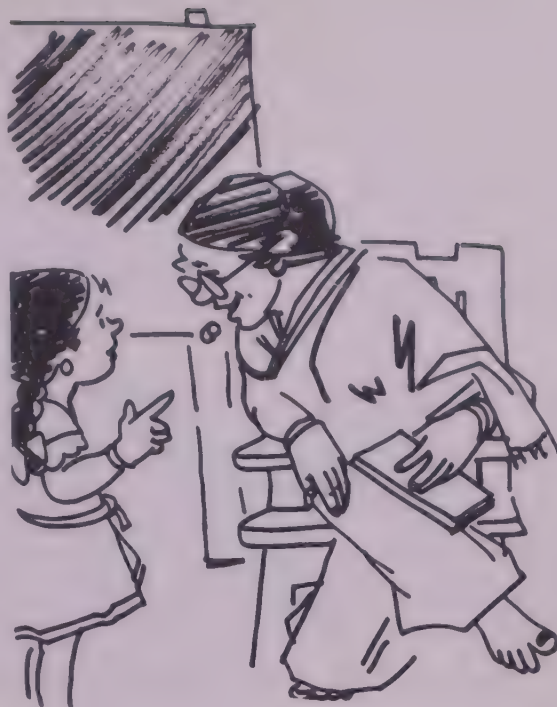
Teaching about alcohol

Children from alcoholic homes tend to consider their circumstances unique and isolated. Education regarding the true facts about alcoholism, clarifies facts for such children. A comprehensive alcohol education should be provided in the class room, where it should be treated as factually as any other subject.

In a classroom setting, the child of an alcoholic does not suffer from any social stigma because he is only one of the many youngsters who simultaneously receive information about alcoholism. This is an ideal place to introduce concepts about life in an alcoholic home, when children can simply listen, learn and take in what they need.

Helping the child to express himself

Verbalisation is an opportunity to release pent up shame, guilt, fears and confusion. Getting this child to talk, may not be easy. Positive environmental feed back can be supplied by the school; but the teacher must realise that in addition to lacking trust in adults, such children may be totally devoid of



positive attitudes towards anyone in a position of authority. The teacher's approach must be friendly, supportive, empathetic and non-judgemental, but not overly sympathetic. Once the teacher gains the confidence of the child, the rewards can be enormous. The teacher may not be able to solve all the problems, but will be able to make the child feel that there is an adult who will give him support. Satisfaction and relief can be gained once the child starts sharing/releasing emotions.

Helping the child strengthen his self-esteem

Identifying the children and helping them ventilate, is just the beginning. With tact and empathy, a skilful teacher can do much to help the child gain a positive self concept. Genuine appreciation and encouragement of every effort put in by the child, will lead to a sense of 'I am Okay; I am capable; I can do things'.

It is necessary to maintain a teacher-student relationship. The role of the teacher should be one of 'detached warmth'.

The teacher's attitude should convey, "I want to help you; I will assist you; but you have to do it for yourself." The teacher becomes the guide to a path of self-realisation, not the creator of it.

WHAT IS IT THAT RECOVERING PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP THESE CHILDREN COME OUT OF THEIR PROBLEMS?

The first step is to understand that this is a serious issue to be tackled at the earliest. Once they recognise this, their attitude will change. Here are a few simple and natural things that parents can do, which will have a tremendous impact on their affected children.

* Listening - first step to closeness

Parents should plan and regularly allot time everyday to be 'spent with each child. Relationships grow with effective communication. Effective communication takes place only with effective listening. Listening means sitting in front of the child and making eye contact which will help the child realise that the parents appreciate his point of view. Listening means undivided, focussed and total attention to the exclusion of distraction. Listening well is an enjoyable activity and it will reveal to the parents more about their children and draw them closer to the parents. It will help them to really get to know their children - their hopes, aspirations, interests and friends in addition to their hurts and pains.



Only when good listening is established during normal days, will the child turn to the parent in moments of trouble. He will see in the parent a 'confidant' and will be willing to lower his defences and air his feelings and thoughts.

* **Establishing a positive role model**

Since children adopt their parent's values and follow their behaviour, the parent should start doing whatever he expects his child to do. For example, if the father takes up responsibilities, goes to work on time and follows values like honesty, straightforwardness etc., the child who sees him will take him as his role model and develop a meaningful, qualitative life.

Similarly, a warm, caring mother who shows respect to elders, will be able to instil these qualities in her children also.

* **Strengthening the child's self-esteem**

Children need frequent encouragement. Encouragement assures the child that he has capabilities and that he will be able to achieve things. Parents should make it a point to appreciate each and every effort the child puts in. Focus should be on efforts and not on achievements. Encouragement involves minimising minor setbacks and recognising positive qualities and strengths. Any improvement the child makes, however minor it is, should be acknowledged and encouraged. This will go a long way in making the child feel that he is worthy and capable.

* **Allotting time for fun**

Building a positive relationship with the child starts with having fun. This does not take as much time



as we think. Going out with the family on a picnic, celebrating events like birthdays, and participation in festivals are some activities which provide lot of fun. Gardening, playing indoor games like carrom etc., strengthen togetherness while at the same time, they provide relaxation and recreation. One can have fun even while eating together or exchanging views together. These do not require long hours; they require only proper planning.

* **Communicating love**

To feel secure, each child must have atleast one significant person to love and be loved by. This love should be communicated openly to the child. One need not give a long lecture to express this. Love can be communicated through a warm smile, a pat on the back, a gesture or through a few words. This has got to be done because this alone will ensure the child that he is really being wanted by people close to him.

* **Breaking the 'Don't Talk / Don't Trust' Rules**

The child should be made to understand that alcoholism is a disease. All facts relating to this,

should be openly explained to the child. This will help him understand the associated problems. Only then will he realise that there is no need to keep his father's drinking 'a family secret'. He will come to know that there is nothing wrong with the person; he only suffers from a disease. Realisation of this along with good communication, will help him slowly start disclosing and sharing his problems and needs with people close to him.

When parents make a promise to the child, they should ensure that it is kept. If due to circumstances, they are not able to keep the promise, they should make the child understand why promises are not kept. False hopes do not lead to anything positive. Promises kept will help the child in building a trustworthy relationship with the parents.

* **Respecting the child's feelings**

Good listening means listening not only to spoken words, but also to his feelings, emotions, interests and aspirations. The child's feelings, whatever they are, should definitely be respected. For example, when the child is talking about a problem he had with his classmate, it may sound 'minor' to the parent; but for the child, it is a 'major' issue. Recognition of this, will automatically lead to respecting his feelings without ever passing judgements. Sharing the child's happiness, sorrow, achievements and pains with an open mind will encourage the child to come out with all his feelings. Slowly the child will get reassured and forget the 'Don't Feel' rule.

* **Addressing the special needs of these children**

If the parent finds his child too responsible for his age, he should be alert enough to realise that his child has many emotional needs which are unmet.

Parents should encourage the child to express his feelings and start taking up responsibilities which the child is carrying, not out of choice, but out of compulsion.

In some families, the eldest child becomes the constant source of ventilation and support for the non-alcoholic mother. The mother is able to lighten her burden by sharing all the problems with her child; but she should be aware that this burden is too heavy for the child to bear. Therefore, she should stop passing on her load to the Child and start sharing it with some other adult close to her.

If the child is adjusting or placating, the parents should realise that the child is undergoing lot of stress without openly showing it. This child needs encouragement and appreciation. He longs for physical touch, and is filled with emotional needs which should definitely be addressed by the parents.

The rebellious child is normally a soft hearted being longing for love, affection and support. Openly communicating love is a **must** for these children.



Implementation of the suggestions given above, will provide some solution for the problems within an alcoholic family. If the parent is not able to bring the child closer to him in spite of repeated efforts, he may approach counsellors who specialise in this field. Only sobriety and family growth can help in overcoming all the problems faced by these children.

SPECIALLY FOR PARENTS

Remember, if your children are to grow, to have healthy and satisfying lives of their own, they need not only the help of people and friends in their community, but most of all **they need you, your concern, your understanding and love** within your healthy family environment.

BITTER ARE THE TEARS

OF YOUR CHILD

- SOOTHEN THEM

RUFFLED ARE THE THOUGHTS

OF YOUR CHILD

- QUIETEN THEM

HEAVY IS THE GRIEF

OF YOUR CHILD

- LIGHTEN IT

SOFT IS THE HEART

OF YOUR CHILD

- EMBRACE IT

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ALCOHOLISM - A TREATABLE DISEASE

After extensive research, it has now been well established that **ALCOHOLISM IS A DISEASE** - a disease which can be controlled by medical and psychological treatment.

Without treating this disease, any other alternative like changing the job, getting married, etc. will not help the alcoholic to recover.

The disease of alcoholism can be treated. In the process of treatment, the patient gets help to keep away from alcohol totally for life. Such **total abstinence** is essential and it is **the only solution** to the problem of alcoholism.

Alcoholism is not a moral weakness, not a lack of will power, not a crime, not a sin. It is a **DISEASE**. An alcoholic is a **Sick person** - a person who needs help.

HELP IS AVAILABLE - A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

TTK Hospital of TT Ranganathan Clinical Research Foundation is a pioneer, voluntary, non-profit organisation dedicated to the treatment and rehabilitation of people addicted to alcohol.

The Hospital offers a comprehensive in-patient treatment programme. It also includes the involvement of the family of the alcoholic including his children. Treatment at the Hospital utilises a multi-disciplinary approach with the help of Psychiatrists, Physicians, Psychologists, Social Workers and Counsellors.

Follow-up is an important aspect of treatment at the Hospital. It includes medical check up, counselling sessions and after-care group meetings. Patients are encouraged to go over to the Hospital once in every 10 or 15 days. Follow-up is maintained for a period of five years.

For further information contact :

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